Migration in the time of empire

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Crispin Bates

Millions migrated to work the plantations following the abolition of slavery in the British and French empires. Like today they needed help to do so, and like today that help wanted its cut.

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The problems associated with today's mass migrations are nothing new. They have always arisen from the incompetent or misguided policies of governments, usually the same governments creating the conditions from which migrants are trying to escape.

In the current European refugee crisis, an attempt is commonly made to distinguish between ‘deserving’ refugees, to whom asylum should be granted, and ‘economic migrants’, who should be excluded. However the distinction is not clear cut. So-called ‘economic migrants’ are often the victims of misrule by totalitarian regimes, persecuted with political and economic discrimination as well as the loss of civil liberties. Their poverty is often brought about or compounded by the actions of politicians, and even when those actions do not lead to war, the famine or economic distress that so often results from misrule can be just as deadly as guns and bombs.

Perhaps the most extreme form of political repression arises when a country is occupied by a foreign power. This describes the condition of many countries in Africa and Asia during the era of European colonialism. Political rights and civil liberties were minimal, and territories were administered primarily in the interests of the occupying power, and not those of the indigenous population. The question arises, therefore, of whether labour migrants of the colonial era were maximising their economic opportunities, or were simply refugees. The answer, as today, is often both. Migrants made choices, but only amongst a very limited range of options. One might question the freedom of choice when it comes to most economies, but in these circumstances the range of options was often peculiarly constrained.

Migration in the age of colonialism

Global migration has a longer history than most people imagine. Apart from the millions of Europeans who migrated to America and other countries in the hope of a better life, some 20 million Chinese migrated overseas between 1840 and 1940. Mostly they went to Malaysia, where they worked in the tin mining industry, or to the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), Siam, French Indo-China, and South Africa to mine gold.

Were labour migrants of the colonial era maximising their economic opportunities, or were they simply refugees?

Indians migrated overseas in equally large numbers from the 1830s onwards. Many of these migrants came from regions with traditionally high levels of out-migration, such as Bihar in northern India and Tamil Nadu in the south, but eventually every part of the Indian subcontinent became involved. Some replaced African slave labour following the abolition of slavery in the British and French empires in the mid-1800s, working the sugar plantations in the Caribbean, the southern Indian Ocean, South Africa, Fiji, Reunion, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. Even larger numbers found work in the rice, coffee, tea and rubber plantations of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia. They also served as construction workers, much as they do in the Middle East in the present day.

Notoriously one-sided labour contracts obliged Indian labourers to work continuously for three, four, or five years for a single employer in order to pay for their passage. They had no passports to be confiscated, only an emigration certificate and a contract of employment. If they did not complete their contract they would lose the right to a free passage home.

Criticism from the anti-slavery society in London, which dubbed the first wave of indentured migration ‘a new system of slavery’, led to the suspension of indentured migration in 1838. It was resumed five years later under close supervision. Within India, opponents of Indian overseas migration were reassured by promises that only the poorest and most unskilled Indian workers would be recruited. However, statistical evidence suggests that by the late 1850s, migrants were being recruited from amongst the landless and impoverished within all sections of society.

The great Indian Uprising of 1857 gave a boost to the trade, as the economy of rural north India was devastated by war with successive famines following in 1861 and 1865. Tens of thousands of high caste Indians from disbanded regiments of the Bengal army, in particular, found themselves out of work at this time and many migrated overseas. It is true that the wages of indentured labourers were often better than those available locally. However, alternative employment opportunities were severely limited.

Indentured life

The indenture contract was similar to that in use in most modern armies. It was less onerous in one respect, as if they saved enough the workers could buy themselves out of the contract at any time. The work was hard, however, and although hospitals were provided and protectors and inspectors were appointed (to whom they could and did complain), the rights of workers were always constrained by the pervasive racism of their employers and colonial governments.

Emigration as an indentured labourer helped some to escape caste, gender, or religious persecution.

If workers fled from the plantation they could be arrested and imprisoned for vagrancy (a law borrowed from Britain), and workers who were absent from work without permission were, in some colonies, penalised with a two-day deduction of wages for every day they were away (the notorious ‘double cut’). Although banned by labour ordinances towards the end of the century, overseers in some estates often did not hesitate to use violence and abuse to keep their workers in line.

Like most long-distance migrants, the Indian recruits (referred to as ‘coolies’ – a title that later assumed a derogatory meaning) had only a limited knowledge of where they were going. There were sugar plantations in India, and some were already familiar with the type of work involved. But most had no relevant previous experience. What attracted them was the possibility of saving money and returning home with it.

For others returning home was not part of the plan. Emigration as an indentured labourer helped some to escape caste, gender, or religious persecution. For others, indenture offered a route to acquiring land – something they could never have achieved in India – and so they stayed on in the sugar colonies. In the British colony of Trinidad, the earliest migrants were offered a free grant of land if they agreed to stay rather than claim the free passage home to which they were entitled. In time, many gave up working on the plantations and became farmers or shopkeepers.

A perilous path to improvement

Between 1.5 and 2 million Indians were contracted as indentured workers in the decades following the abolition of slavery. Large, settled communities of Indian workers began to emerge in the sugar colonies, making indentured labour, by the early twentieth century, redundant. This was not, however, the only way the inter-Asian labour trade found its workers. Other forms of recruitment included the so-called ‘free migration’ of workers, which saw Indian *kanganies* and *maistries* advancing wages and lending money to workers

to pay their passage. Most went to the coffee and tea plantations of Assam and Sri Lanka, and later on the rubber plantations of Malaysia. Unlike the migration of indentured labourers to work in the sugar trade, this form of migration was not closely supervised by colonial governments. We will therefore never know the true numbers, but many millions were involved.

In all these migrations there was an opportunity for betterment, but at huge risk and often at great cost. Prior to the introduction of steamships, disease might break out on ships during the long sea passage, leading to extraordinary levels of mortality. Some were also lost in drownings at sea and shipwrecks. Once they arrived, especially in the early years, the treatment meted out to workers by former slave owners was often harsh.

Gradually though, over time, conditions were improved with the introduction of increased rations and more rigorous inspections. The complaints and protests of the workers, who struggled against colonial discrimination, played an important role in ameliorating the trade: so much so that the Internal Labour Organisation in the 1920s looked to the indentured labour ordinances for examples on how to define the rights of workers. Much as in the present day, the least fortunate migrants were those who found themselves working in entirely unregulated industries, such as agriculture or domestic work.

Kanganis and *sirdars*: the 'traffickers' of their time

It is often assumed that planters and factory owners were themselves responsible for recruiting the workers. However, intermediaries of various sorts played a crucial role in all Indian overseas labour migration. The most important of these intermediaries was the *kangani* or *sirdar*: who was commonly a returnee migrant worker or overseer, who could provide knowledge and information about the passage, guarantee safe arrival, and confirm onward employment.

In the 1920s the ILO looked to the indentured labour ordinances for examples on how to define the rights of workers.

Much like modern people smugglers – often referred to as 'traffickers' – they were pilloried at the time. They provided a service to the planters by sourcing employees, usually from the Indian rural locality where they originated, that the planters could not otherwise secure. They had to be paid for this, and often demanded extortionate fees. At the same time, they organised and supported the workers: navigating their way to the depot, providing them food and clothing during the passage, lending money (at high rates of interest), and securing the best possible wages for them if they chose to re-indenture on the sugar estate (in which they also claimed a share). They were indispensable to all concerned, but their loyalties were always in question.

Numerous colonial governments attempted to do away with the *kanganis*, *sirdars*, and other intermediaries with the hope of encouraging an entirely 'free' market in labour migrants. This proved to be impossible, even after the abandonment of the indentured labour contract in the 1920s under pressure from Indian nationalists. Much like people smugglers today, they provided a service which no one else could. Migrants depended

upon the networks and knowledge of intermediaries to survive their long journeys and to find employment on the other side, as while independent labour migration was not illegal, contracts could not be secured without the involvement of intermediaries.

Hindering movement, creating movement: European policy then and now

The trend of expanding free trade while tightening border controls began in the 1880s, with immigration restrictions introduced by the United States, Canada and Australia to halt the inward flow of Chinese labourers (and, at least in the US, 'immoral' women). Travel restrictions became more widespread in the 1930s, as migrants were scapegoated for the strikes and riots brought about by the Great Depression. Border controls then became endemic after World War II, as newly independent social democratic states struggled to define and control their citizens, to raise taxes, and to determine the legal rights of their populations. It is these restrictions that have made intermediaries of various sorts even more important than they were in the past for those seeking and needing to cross the globe in search of sanctuary and employment.

Europe generally does not allow refugees to apply for asylum before they reach European soil, and at the same time European air, sea and road transport regulations forbid any migrant to board a plane without a visa. These policies are a boon for the smuggling industry to Europe – indeed, they largely create it. Many politicians have furthermore pointed out how the foreign policies of the European powers – particularly the arming of rebels in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' and the bombing of Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen – contribute to migration.

Nineteenth century colonialism limited the opportunities of Indian subjects so that they had little choice but to become indentured migrants, for which they were recruited by Indian *sirdars*. So too have European governments compounded a state of war alongside an exclusionary legal regime, forcing would-be migrants into the hands of smugglers if they are to have any chance of making the crossing.

In 1875 a royal commission investigating indentured migration to Mauritius received conflicting reports regarding the *sirdars*: sometimes they seemed to serve the interests only of themselves, but at other times they clearly defended their gangs of workers. Neither the workers or planters could survive without them. The royal commission concluded they were an "evil" – hypocritically blamed on "the persistence of native practices" – that must be endured.

Just as there were 'good' and 'bad' *sirdars* in colonial times, the same can be said of intermediaries in the present: at the one end there are legitimate and responsible foreign labour recruiters and at the other end are those who use intimidation to coerce migrants into exploitative employment in industries lacking regulation. People smugglers operate along a similar spectrum. Their actions are illegal under law but their services are in great demand, and that creates the potential for exploitation but does not guarantee it.

European governments have much to answer for as well. Because of their illegality, smugglers are forced to abandon lorries or boats before reaching their destinations, off-loading sea passengers onto dinghies that either sink or are confiscated upon arrival. Intermediaries in colonial times travelled with migrants for the whole journey, acted as overseers on the plantations, and often spent their entire lives with the persons they recruited and accompanied overseas. In some ways that made migration less hazardous in colonial times than it is now. The culpability of European governments for the poor conditions migrants have to suffer is in many ways similar, but the results are even more devastating today.